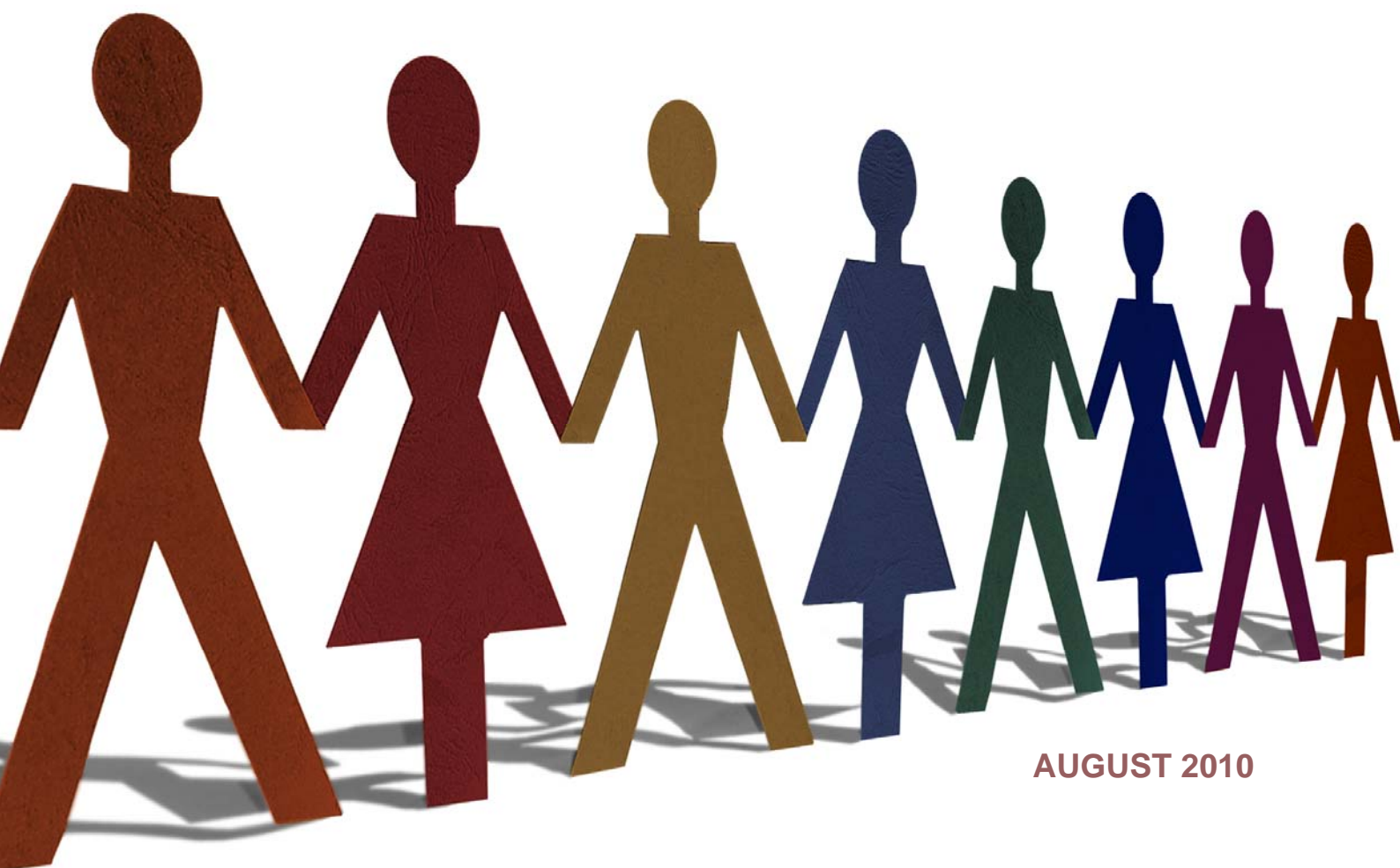**brap**

making equality work for **everyone**

ENGAGING PEOPLE

GUIDE FOR IMPROVING THE INVOLVEMENT OF BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC PEOPLE IN ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

AUGUST 2010

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- learning and professional development

- social innovation and community insight

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- community mapping

- service design

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making equality work for everyone

toolkit funded by Government Office for the West Midlands

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A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this toolkit we use the term 'BME', meaning 'black and minority ethnic'. 'Black' is used here as a political term, and applies to people of a non-White background, including those from Asian, Chinese, and African communities. 'Minority ethnic' refers to White, non-UK communities (such as those of American, Australian, Polish, and Irish heritage). 'BME' is a relatively recent term, but is now used extensively in policy and preferred by organisations such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

INTRODUCTION

This toolkit is the result of research, undertaken on behalf of Government Office West Midlands, into how local authorities engage with black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. Participants in the project came from across the local authority structure, from councillors and LSP directors to community engagement officers. brap would like to acknowledge their openness, honesty and sincere willingness to improve their engagement with BME communities.

In the quest to ensure that engagement of citizens is as inclusive as possible, our research found that local authorities appeared to be confused about the concept of 'representation' – in particular, who represented communities, how representatives were to be found, and the importance of making consultation 'representative'.

This toolkit is intended to help defuse this confusion. It sets out ideas on how to improve the practice of local authorities so that their consultations fair, efficient, and effective.

There are already a plethora of guidance booklets and advice documents designed to help local authorities engage more effectively. This toolkit offers additional support on areas of engagement that people find challenging. As such, this toolkit should be used alongside your authority's own guidance, protocols and codes of practice.

As you will see, this toolkit argues that truly effective consultation with all people means we have to move beyond 'representation' and focus instead on the processes that make consultation really fair and accessible.

To make this clear, this toolkit is divided into three sections:

- '**Common pitfalls'** explains the challenges facing those who seek to engage
- *'Processes* **not** *outcomes'* explains how committing to some core values can make your consultations fair
- '**The keys to effective engagement'** sets out how you can promote those values step-by-step

COMMON PITFALLS

Engagement with the community is important, but we also know that its aspirations are accompanied with many difficult questions:

- can you assume that consultation is fairer because someone from a BME background is on a committee or had input into consultation through an additional BME-focused consultation event?
- is the inclusion of the same set of BME leaders or representatives better than having no representatives from those communities?
- how can you ensure that in the future BME people will be able to participate equally in *mainstream* consultation events, and should this be an aspiration we should be striving towards?
- by including BME communities in our consultation, can we assume that we also tick the box on our duty to consider race equality issues?

And as if consultation weren't hard enough, it's often made more difficult by burdensome regulations and legislative requirements encouraging sometimes 'tokenistic' gestures towards the involvement of under-represented groups. Add to that the range of other issues demanding an organisation's time and resources, and it's no wonder that people sometimes only do as much as they have to in order to satisfy statutory targets and pressure from community groups.

To show that their consultations are fair, some public bodies employ the engagement strategies in the following table. Whilst these strategies may be effective in the short term, they can lead to problems in the long run. Here, we outline what some of those problems are: we'll show how to avoid them in the next chapter.

Strategies	Potential pitfalls
• appointing community 'representatives' to advocate on behalf of certain groups	• sometimes representatives don't have the skills or knowledge to engage in meaningful consultation (see below) • representatives will not be able to represent the diversity of views in their community
• ensuring that boards, committees, and meetings have 'some' BME participation, but making it clear that they are not representatives of the wider community	• enforcing 'representative' participation can appear contradictory: after all, if people aren't supposed to represent entire communities, why do we try and have particular communities represented?
• undertaking consultation when evidence and data already exist from previous research but hasn't been used	• repetitive consultation with little evidence of impact can give people the impression their opinions aren't being listened to
• putting on additional consultation events for BME communities (even if the BME population in the area is relatively small)	• additional events may be time-consuming and not an appropriate use of resources • additional events may appear tokenistic if the original events were conducted fairly

THINKING ABOUT *PROCESSES* NOT *OUTCOMES*

The solution is to move away from thinking about the *outputs* of processes (the numbers of BME people engaged, for example) and to think more about the fairness of *processes and structures* themselves (how and why you engage). After all, over the years local authorities have sometimes achieved good outputs – consulting with more BME people – but this is often via additional, 'add-on' measures. Unfortunately this hasn't created sustained and substantial equality, many BME people still feel that 'mainstream' decision-making processes are inaccessible to them. But by making equality part of your mainstream engagement practice, participation across all types of engagement forums can be improved in the long-run.

To deliver engagement that avoids equality challenges, local authorities will need to practise – and, importantly, believe in – certain behaviours and values, many of which relate to common sense and good engagement practice generally. In the table on the opposite page we've listed some of those challenges and the behaviours and values you may need to adopt to address them.

For many years authorities have been judged by the numbers of people from particular backgrounds they engage, rather than the quality of input, or the fairness of their processes. Yet sometimes attendance at community engagement events are influenced more by people's interest in a particular subject, or their willingness to contribute. If people don't participate in those forums, at least you will have evidence to show people that your processes were fair and that you have taken steps to improve accessibility and communication of engagement opportunities.

Challenge	Values	Opportunities
Explaining to people who were engaged the impact of their information, even if impact was minimal	Accountable/ transparent	Share promptly the results of the consultation with all those involved and explain why you made the final decision you did with reference to people's input
Engaging a range of service users and not just the 'usual suspects'	Inclusive	Be aware that you may have to extend the scope of those engaged, with more emphasis put on 'what people know' as opposed to 'what people look like'. Recognise that 'representation' from communities of interest can help to meet public expectations on equality and diversity – but also be aware that you will sometimes have to help change those expectations if they are not realistic
Employing the most appropriate consultation/ engagement technique. This will require a clear understanding of the *purpose* of the engagement	Effective	Consider carefully who should be involved in community engagement and match the purpose of the engagement to the people that are invited to take part Consider the best type of community engagement activity to achieve the desired goal
Not repeating or duplicating other consultation	Efficient	Before undertaking consultation, consider alternatives sources of information and research which may identify community needs (for example, has consultation been carried out by another agency, or by somebody else in your agency before?) Be willing to share (where possible) the results of your engagement with other relevant partners
Avoiding 'token gestures' to make consultation 'representative'	Equitable	Help local communities develop and understanding of equality based on the needs of the most vulnerable rather than people's 'race' Be confident in defending the values your consultation is based on

If you commit yourself to these principles, you should find that your consultations are open, fair, and inclusive.

The next section sets out some actions you can take to help you promote these values in your consultations. They link with the values above:

- Moving beyond 'representation'   **equitable**
- Using the right tools   **effective**
- Building trust in consultation   **transparent**
- Using evidence   **efficient**
- Empowering communities   **inclusive**

Moving beyond 'representation'…

The challenge

Most local authority practitioners recognise that the diversity *within* communities makes the idea of community representatives redundant. However, practitioners are still under pressure from a variety of sources to make their consultations 'representative'. This can sometimes lead to tokenistic engagement which is a drain on local authority practitioners' time and resources.

Bright ideas

Examples of best practice you might like to consider:

- explain to representatives that they won't lose out by not being community advocates: funding and resources will still be allocated to the worst-off, whatever community they come from. Many wards, constituencies, and authorities have benefitted from adding a paragraph in their consultation strategies and protocols explicitly stating that part of the purpose of engagement is to identify the needs of the most vulnerable, regardless of community.
- some residents associations and ward committees choose their participants on the basis of clear 'job descriptions'. "We felt this sent out a clear message that it was people's skills we were interested in, not their background," explained one ward officer.

Key lessons

- recognise that commonality based on ethnicity may not be relevant. A BME young person may have more in common with other white young people than an older BME person, for example.
- think about choosing participants based on their skills and personal knowledge, rather than 'ethnicity'. Make eligibility criteria clear, accessible and consistent.
- equip staff with the communication skills to explain clearly why funding decisions have been made. This should help deal with claims that your decisions lack legitimacy because they were not formed with the input of BME representatives.
- representing issues of equality are different to representing one's own interest or that of a community group. Be confident in seeking this specialist expertise

Using the right tools…

The challenge
Different types of engagement require different methods of consultation. However, it is sometimes difficult to know which consultation method is the most appropriate or effective.

Bright ideas
Examples of best practice you might like to consider:
- a local authority that undertook wide-ranging research of its consultation practices was able to identify which methods and strategies were most effective for the needs of local people. "We carry out a lot of shorter, quick consultation via email now," reported the authority officer.

Key lessons
- Some practitioners aren't always clear about the purpose of community engagement before they plan activities and as a result may not use the best approach or consult with the right people to achieve the result they require. For example:

  - **exploiting grass-roots knowledge of service delivery:** this encompasses activities such as gathering feedback on particular proposals. Since participants will be involved in service design, they will need the time and opportunity to discuss and reflect on the proposals.
  Examples: focus groups; consultation events

  - **identifying unmet needs in existing service provision:** since the purpose of this type of activity is to garner as wide a range of views as possible, it is more suitable to use methods that are light-touch and user-friendly.
  Examples: street surveys; online chat rooms, forums, and blogs

  - **verifying appropriateness of strategic priorities:** the primary purpose here is to generate a discussion within the limits of statutory and financial constraints. Participants would ideally have some knowledge of these and be able to advocate on behalf of a community.
  Examples: community empowerment networks; ward and constituency committees

  - **empowering communities:** this includes activities designed to promote shared decision making. As local stakeholders, participants should have the ability to recognise the influence of political considerations, and to make funding decisions that will help the maximum number of local people at the same time.
  Examples: participatory budgeting

Building trust in consultation…

The challenge

A lot of local authority practitioners find that many people who are asked to participate in engagement have unrealistic expectations of what the consultation can achieve. Sometimes, people are unaware of the political, financial, and statutory factors that can constrain decisions. It is not uncommon for participants to become disillusioned as they find their contributions are not having an identifiable impact on final outcomes.

Bright ideas

Examples of good practice you may want to consider:

- be aware of the language you use. One councillor who set up a meeting to decide how his ward budget should be spent was careful to invite people who wanted to 'discuss' how the money should be spent. "The word 'consult' has come to have connotations for people," he explained. "If the scope for change is limited, it's best not to raise expectations."
- some local authorities are using the collaborative principles in agreements such as Compact to highlight how shared decision making necessarily involves considering other people's point of view.

Key lessons

- Identify any factors that will constrain the final outcome of a consultation. Run through these with participants. If you find that the constraints severely limit the choices that can be made, it is worth asking yourself why you're undertaking the consultation.
- Most local authority practitioners see the need to feed back the results of consultation to participants. However, a lot of work needs to be done to make sure evaluation and record data in a way that allows you to identify the contribution of particular groups of people. In many cases, BME people share the same concerns as everyone else. Recording data appropriately will help you demonstrate this.

Using evidence…

The challenge

Many local authorities collect data that could help them make informed and well-researched decisions about a range of communities. Unfortunately, the data often goes unused. This is for a variety of reasons: sometimes people don't recognise how already existing research can be manipulated or used; quite often people don't know that the data exists! Probably the most common reason, though, is practitioners are often under pressure to undertake consultation as this is seen as conferring legitimacy on a decision.

Bright ideas

Examples of good practice you might want to consider:

- one local community network has built links with local housing associations and PCTs so that they can all share consultation events. This allows stakeholders to draw upon each other's contacts.
- some local authorities are trying to encourage greater sharing of research across departments by circulating engagements events – and their final reports – on the authorities' intranet.

Key lessons

- Recognise that there is a lot of information that can be shared, for example:
  - demographic data
  - research on needs and concerns
  - examples of effective and inclusive engagement practice
  - information about planned consultation events, questionnaires, and surveys which you may be able to take advantage of
  - evidence of how service delivery has been redesigned to combat discrimination, inequality, and poverty
- learn how to extrapolate from secondary research and other examples of service redesign in areas of more diversity
- remember to share your findings!
- be prepared to explain to people how the existing research justifies your decision. Develop the communication skills to do this

Empowering communities…

The challenge

Quite often participants at consultation events are the 'usual suspects'. However, decision making can't continue to be left to those who turn up. Many local authority practitioners want to improve the ability of traditionally excluded groups to engage effectively and equally in consultation but are unsure of how to go about doing it.

Bright ideas

Some examples of good practice you might want to consider:

- one local strategic partnership has developed close links with its local third sector so it can attend third sector events and engage participants. In this way, practitioners are going to participants rather than making participants go to them.
- some ward and constituency committees are investing resources in training local residents with the skills necessary to participate in meetings. "We advertise for people with enthusiasm and a desire to get involved with their community. We explicitly say that we'll provide them with training on things like speaking up in a meeting."

Key lessons

- consider investing resources in improving the ability of traditionally excluded groups to engage effectively and equally in consultation. You may want to consider skills that will allow participants to participate more effectively such as:
  - communication skills, such as public speaking skills
  - listening and conflict mediation skills
  - the knowledge necessary to identify similar barriers to accessing service delivery across social groups (plus being able see where these barriers and needs are specific to a particular group)
- you might want to develop skills necessary to participate in public meetings, to gather evidence about local need, or perhaps disseminate important information such as your local area agreement priorities

HOW WE CAN HELP

Hopefully, this guide has provided some ideas, tips, and suggestions that will prove useful the next time you want to consult on a policy or project.

It's tried to show that there are three important components of effective engagement:

- **action:** using the results of consultation. It's important for people to see that consultation makes a difference. Also, using and sharing data reduces unnecessary consultation
- **empowerment:** giving people the skills to participate. Not only does this give people the confidence to get involved in engagement activities, it also means their contributions are articulate, realistic, and measured
- **design:** ensuring that the methods you use are effective, efficient, and encompass a wide range of people
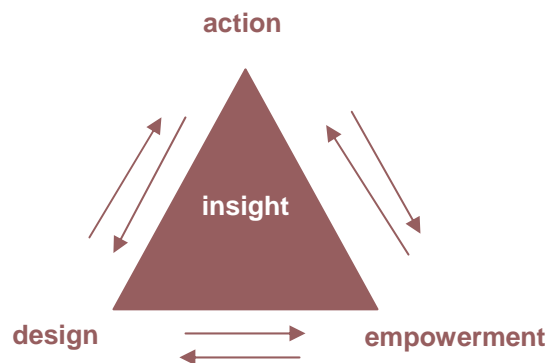
As important as consultation and involvement have been over the last few years, they will soon become fundamental to the work public authorities carry out. As part of the Big Society, residents and neighbourhoods will have far more say in how local communities are shaped; services will increasingly be 'co-produced' with users; and social enterprises

and charities will have a far greater say in the planning and delivery of local priorities.

Taking the time to think about how you make engagement meaningful can add real value to your work and help you meet future challenges today.

So if you're wondering how to develop the skills of people in your area; or if you're unsure of how to best design consultations to *really* find out what people think – give us a call. We're already working with a range of authorities, PCTs, and housing associations to help them get a clearer picture of their local customer base, and we'd be delighted to share with you what we've learnt. Call us on 0121 456 7400 or email us at brap@brap.org.uk.

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